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On Confession and Absolution.

A

PASTORAL LETTER
TO THE CLERGY AND LAITY
OF THE
DIOCESE OF LINCOLN.

BY THE BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

SECOND EDITION.

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A PASTORAL LETTER BY THE BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,—

Circumstances, which I need not particularize, have induced me to address you in a Letter on Confession and Absolution.

For reasons which will hereafter appear I will begin with Absolution.

Few—whether Bishops or Priests—can have taken part in the service for the Ordination of Priests, and in pronouncing the words which are said over them at the laying on of hands on those who are ordained, without reflecting what thoughts will be produced by those solemn words in the minds of those who are ordained, and of others who are present at their Ordination.

Those words are as follows:—“ Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven ; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God and of His Holy Sacraments ; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

What do these words mean ?

On the first portion of them, “ Receive the Holy Ghost,” I will not now dwell. The objections which have been made by some to the use of them have been fully considered and answered by the writers whose names will be found in the note below.*

* Hooker. *Eccles. Polity*, v. lxxvii., 5-7. Bp. Andrewes *Sermon on St. John*, xx. 22, 23. Works iii., 260, v., 82 ed., Oxford, 1843. Bp. Cosin, *Sermon vi.*, Vol. 1, p. 103, ed. Oxf. 1847. Dr. Nicholl's *Notes on the Common Prayer on the Ordering of Priests*, Lond., 1712.

But the other part, viz. :—“ Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven,” needs careful examination.

These words are derived from our Lord Himself, when speaking to the disciples after His Resurrection. (John xx., 22, 23.) And by some among us the recital of them at the Ordination of Priests is supposed to invest those who are ordained, with a power which is specially, if not exclusively, to be exercised in the *Absolution* of penitents *confessing* their sins *privately* to the Priest ; and, after such Confession, receiving the forgiveness of sins from him in the utterance of a special form of Absolution, in the following terms, or some equivalent to them :—“ *I absolve thee* from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.—Amen.”

The consequences of such a construction of those words demand serious consideration.

On the one side, some who resent the enforcement—and even deny the use—of *private* confession, have been induced by that construction to express an earnest desire to alter the Ordination Service of the Church, and to expunge those words from it.

This wish has been recently uttered by some in the Church of Ireland ; and consequently a serious misunderstanding, if not an open schism, appears to be imminent between the Church of Ireland, * rejecting those words, on the one side, and the Churches of England and America, and our Colonies, retaining them, in their Ordinal, on the other.

But this is not all.

Whether the words in question are expunged from the Ordinal of a Church or no, they can never be erased from the Gospel of St. John ; and they have ever been regarded by the Church as having a special reference to the Ordination of Christian Priests in every age ; and if the construction put upon them by some, as above described, be true, no removal of them from the Ordinal will affect that

* See for example, the Rev. Canon Reichel's Speech in the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, p. 25, Dublin, 1873.

construction, but rather will give it a sharper edge, by reason of the implied recognition of that construction even by those who greatly mislike it.

Yet further, if that construction be sound, then they, who are ordained Priests, will feel it to be their duty to urge all men to resort to private Confession ; and they will think that the words said over their own heads at the most solemn hour of their lives, have been uttered in vain, and have been mere idle and empty sounds, unless they earnestly exhort their hearers to come to them for Confession.

Therefore we must expect that youthful Priests, in the fervour of their piety and zeal, will feel much distress of mind, as if they were unfaithful to their trust, and untrue to Christ, Who has given them their priestly Commission, and as if they were guilty of hiding the talent entrusted to them at their Ordination, if they do not immediately betake themselves to hear Confessions, and if they do not all in their power to constrain all in their flocks, aged and young alike, to come to them as their ghostly fathers and spiritual physicians, for their souls' health, and to confess all their most secret sins to them, in order to receive forgiveness at their hands.

The stream cannot rise higher than the fountain. In order, therefore, to ascertain the sense of those words used in the Ordination Service, we must enquire into their force as spoken by our Blessed Lord Himself to His ten Apostles on the Evening of His Resurrection from the dead.

First, then, those words preserve us against the stern and unmerciful heresy of the Novatians, who asserted that sins committed after baptism are irremissible ; and those words assure us that Christ has left in his Church power to forgive sins ; and therefore in the Creed it is said, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” to which article were added in some ancient symbols the words, “in the Holy Church.”*

Next, let us observe that the words of our Blessed Lord declare that remission of sins is effectually dispensed by the Christian

* See Bishop Pearson on the Creed, Art. ix.

Ministry. Christ did not say to His disciples, “ Whosoever sins ye *attempt* to remit ;” nor do the words, literally rendered, mean “ Whosoever sins ye remit ;” but, as speaking of a thing already effected, He says, “ Whosoever sins ye *shall have remitted*, they have been remitted unto them ;” and, therefore, the Latin version of those words is not “ Quorum remittetis peccata,” but, “ Quorum remiseritis peccata.”

Hence it is evident, that the work is not done by the Priest, except ministerially, and as an instrument in the hand of God, and by power and authority received from Him. For, “ Who can forgive sins but God only ?” (Mark ii. 7). “ To Thee only it appertaineth to forgive sins,” we say in our Communion Service ; and it is a common thing with the Fathers of the ancient Church to prove the Godhead of Christ from the fact of His forgiving sins.* And S. Ambrose† also proves the divinity of the Holy Ghost from the words of Our Lord, “ Receive ye the Holy Ghost ; whosoever sins ye remit, &c., they are remitted unto them.” For, (says S. Ambrose,) “ Behold here, that sins are forgiven through the power of the Holy Ghost ; men contribute their ministry for the remission of sins, but they do not exercise any right of power therein. They do not remit sins in their own name, but in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Ministers *pray* for the forgiveness, but the Godhead *grants* it. Their part is to obey ; but the gift is from God.” And Saint Chrysostom similarly says, in his homily on our Lord’s words in St. John, “ The whole work of forgiveness is of Divine favour and grace. It is God alone who gives what the priest dispenses ; and however far our human philosophy may reach, it can never grasp the extent of that grace. I say not this in order that men may presume upon God’s grace and be remiss, but in order that, although some priests may be careless, ye may not heap evils upon yourselves. And why

* See S. Irenaeus, v. 17 ; S. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos Orat.* iii ; S. Augustine, Serm. 99, “ Homo non potest peccata dimittere ; illa quæ sibi a Christo dimitti creditit, Christum Deum esse creditit ;” S. Jerome in Matth. ix ; S. Chrysostom in Matth., Hom. 29. See Ussher, *Answer to a Jesuit*, p. 79, and Bingham, Book xix. 1.

† S. Ambrose, *de Spiritu Sancto*, iii. 18 ; S. Augustine, Serm. 99, “ Spiritus dimittit peccata ; Spiritus Deus est.”

do I speak of priests? Neither angels nor archangels can do any thing to affect the gifts which are bestowed on us by God ; but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost provide them all ; and the priest only lends his own tongue and hand in dispensing them."

By this true doctrine of the ancient Church we are guarded against the errors of some later times, and especially of those who have taught since the fourth Lateran Council in the 13th century, and the Council of Trent in the 16th century after Christ, that God has disabled and divested Himself of His power to forgive sins, except by the ministry of the Priest, and on terms which have been devised by men. We hold that the removal of sin from the soul is no priestly act, but the work of God alone. We do not say with the Church of Rome, that Absolution *takes away sin*, but that it assures us of God's gracious forgiveness of sin. Our assertion is that God has given the key of pardon to His Church, but that the key is God's key, and not man's, and that it has no power to open the gate of forgiveness, unless the hand which holds it is guided by God, and except the key moves in the wards of a true faith and sincere repentance in the sinner's heart.

And now let us enquire—How is this ministerial work of remission performed?

1. Christ Himself supplies an answer to this question. After His Resurrection He declared to His disciples His Will that "Repentance and *remission of sins* should be *preached* in His Name among all Nations," beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke xxiv. 47, cp. Acts iii. 19, xiii. 38). "In Christ, (says the Apostle of the Gentiles,) "we have redemption through His Blood, *the forgiveness of sins*, according to the riches of His grace." (Eph. i. 7, Rom. iii. 24, 25.) St. Paul describes this work of preaching remission of sins, as "the Ministry of Reconciliation." "All things are of God (he says) who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation, to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the *Word of reconciliation*. Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you

by us ; we pray you in Christ's stead be ye reconciled to God." (2 Cor. v. 18—20.) Thus, then, the Ministers of Christ are rightly said to *remit sins*, because they awaken men from the sleep of sin, and dispose them to repentance by setting before them the terrors of the Lord for the guilty, and the promises of life eternal to the faithful, and by proclaiming in God's Name free pardon to all who repent and believe, through "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son *which cleanseth from all sin*," (1 John i. 7,) and by preaching that Word which God, Who alone can remit sins by His own power, has appointed and commanded to be preached for the remission of sins. Thus they *remit sin*, just as Timothy is said by St. Paul to *save* himself and those that hear him, (1 Tim. iv. 16,) because he ministered those things which Christ, Who is the only Saviour, had instituted and appointed for the salvation of man ; and just as a Physician of the body is said to *heal a disease*, because *he applies* those medicines which the One Divine Creator and Healer has made and given for that purpose.

2. Next, the Priests of the Church may be rightly said to *remit sins*, because they minister the Holy Sacrament of Baptism which Christ has instituted for the remission of sins. St. Peter, having received a commission from Christ, preached in his first sermon this exhortation, "Repent, and be *baptized*, every one of you, in the Name of Jesus Christ *for the remission of sins*. (Acts ii. 38, cp. Acts xxii. 16, Eph. v. 26.) And, therefore, we say in the Creed, "I believe in one Baptism for the *remission of sins*."

I am writing, my dear friends, to those who revere the authority of the ancient Fathers of the Church, and I would remind you that the Fathers in commenting on our Lord's words, "Whosoever sins ye remit, &c.," frequently apply them to the ministration of Baptism. Thus S. Cyprian,* Bishop of Carthage and Martyr, in the third century, having quoted those words applies them to that sacrament. And so S. Cyril of Alexandria.† Baptism is called by Tertullian‡ *felix aquæ sacramentum in quo ablutis delictis in vitam aeternam*

Cyprian, Ep. 69, *ad Magnum*, p. 185, ed. Fell ; and Ep. 73, *ad Jubaianum*, p. 201.

† S. Cyril, in *Joann*, c. 20. ‡ Tertullian, *de Baptismo*, c. 1.

liberamur ;” and it is called by St. Augustine,* “ magna indulgentia (or principal remission) unde incipit omnis renovatio, in quâ omnis solvitur reatus et ingeneratus et additus.”

But now it may be said, Do not *Deacons* administer Baptism, and if our Lord’s words refer to the ministry of *Baptism*, why does the Church of England not use them in the Ordination of Deacons, but in that of *Priests*? To this question it may be replied, that those words of our Lord were addressed to the ten Apostles ; and that the Apostles, strictly speaking, were not Priests but Bishops. The ancient Fathers teach, and the Church of England holds, that there are three orders of ministers in the Church of God,† Bishops, Priests, Deacons. Bishops are successors of the Apostles ; Priests succeed the seventy, of whom St. Luke writes‡ (Luke x. 1—17) Deacons are successors of those whose ordination is described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts vi. 1—6).

With reverence be it said, the reason why our Lord addressed these words to the Apostles was that the power of ministering the Sacraments, and even of Preaching, is primarily in Bishops, and subordinately in Priests and Deacons. According to the judgment of the ancient Church, the Apostolic Office,—and after it the Episcopate,—which have their origin in Christ, the great Apostle of our profession (Hebr. iii.,) contains in it the primary principle and germ from which all the functions of the Priesthood and Diaconate are evolved and developed.

Thus S. Ignatius says,* “ it is not lawful to baptize, or to administer the Holy Communion without the leave of the Bishop.” And S. Ambrose says,† “ although Priests baptize, yet the origin (exordium) of their power is from the Bishop ;” and Tertullian,‡ and St. Jerome say, that neither Deacons nor Priests have power to administer baptism without the authority of the Bishop. In our

* S. Augustine, *Enchirid.*, c. 64.

† See the Preface to the Ordination Services in the Book of Common Prayer.

‡ See S. Jerome, *de Mansionibus*, Mans. vi., and *Theophylact* on S. Luke x. Bishop Andrewes says to Peter Moulin, in *Opuscula Postuma*, p. 183 & 210, ed. Oxf., 1852, and compare Vol. ii. p. 63. “ Everywhere among the Fathers, Bishops are said to have succeeded the Apostles, and Presbyters the Seventy-two.”

* S. Ignatius, *Epist.*, *ad Smyrn.*, c. 8. † S. Ambrose, *de Sacramentis*, iii., 1. ‡ Tertullian, *de Bapt.*, c. 17; S. Jerome, *Contra Luciferianos*, pt. ii., p. 295, ed. Bened. Paris, 1706; see Bingham, Book ii., chap. iii.

own Church, Deacons have authority to baptize in “*the absence of the Priest* ;” and in case of the baptism of adults, reference is to be made by Priests to the Bishop.

Let me here observe in passing, that they who preach and baptize without any sanction and commission from a Bishop, will not find any allowance of such a proceeding in the writings of Christian Antiquity.

I see no reason therefore to doubt the soundness of the opinion delivered by some of our most learned divines,* following the ancient Fathers of the Church, that the words of our Blessed Lord, “Whosoever sins ye remit,” contain a commission to administer the Sacrament of Baptism and to confer Absolution thereby.

3. It cannot be questioned that they also comprehend a power to consecrate the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, which, as our Lord Himself declared, was instituted by Him for the *remission of sins* (Matt. xxvi. 28), and to give *Absolution* thereby to all penitent, faithful, and loving receivers of the Holy Eucharist who confess their sins to God. And, therefore, in our Office for that Sacrament, when we are about to confess our sins to Him and to receive those mysteries, we pray to God for grace “so to eat the flesh and drink the Blood of His dear Son, that our sinful bodies may be *made clean* by *His Body*, and our *souls washed* through His most precious Blood.”

The Holy Communion is the true “Sacrament of Penance,” after Baptism. It is of divine appointment for the pardon of sins. It has the essence of a Sacrament both in outward form and inward virtue ; which cannot be said of the so-called “Sacrament of Penance.” And it is derogatory to its dignity, and to the honour of Him Who instituted it, to put any thing else as “a Sacrament of Penance,” with that title, in its place.

The doctrine of the so-called “Sacrament of Penance,” as taught by the Church of Rome, is beset with contradictions ; there is no

* Such as Francis Mason, *De Ministerio Anglicano*, Book V., chap. x. ; Dr. Isaac Barrow, *De Potestate Clavium*, Vol. iv., p. 58, ed. Lond., 1687 ; Bp. Jeremy Taylor, *Doctrine of Repentance*, chap. x., sect. 4 ; Joseph Bingham, *Antiquities*, xix. 1, and his two excellent Sermons and two Letters to the Bishop of Winchester (Bp. Trelawny), on Absolution, at the end of his *Antiquities of the Christian Church*, Vol. viii., Lond., 1829 ; also Bp. Jewel, *Apol.*, c. vi. ; Abp. Bramhall on *Consecration*, &c., chap. xi., vol. iii., p. 167, ed. Oxford, 1844.

consistency in her teaching as to what constitutes the form of the said Sacrament, and in what its matter consists (Hooker, VI. iv. 3. ep. Chemnit. *Examen Concil. Trid. de Pœnit.*, c. iii), and that Church makes satisfaction to be a part of the Sacrament of Penance (*Concil. Trident.* Sessio xiv. 3), and yet separates satisfaction from it, by pronouncing Absolution first, and by imposing works of satisfaction to be done afterwards; which is repugnant to the teaching of Scripture, and to the doctrine and practice of the primitive Church.

4. Another mode of remitting sins is by the *prayers* of the Priests of God. This is what St. James declares, when he exhorts the sick “to send for the elders,” or priests of the Church, that they may pray over him, and his sins shall be forgiven (James v. 14, 15).

And therefore, S. Chrysostom says, combining various ways in which the Christian Priest remits sins, that they do it when they regenerate men (by baptism), and also when they do it by *prayer*, and he then quotes the words of St. James. And St. Ambrose,* referring to our Lord’s words (John xx. 23), says, “Men exercise their ministry in forgiving sins. They *pray* to God, and He gives pardon.”

Thus, then, we may say in reply to the question, What is the force of the words, “Whosoever sins ye remit,” spoken by our Blessed Lord to the Apostles on the evening of the Resurrection, after He had breathed upon them, and said, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost,” and spoken to the Priests of the Church of Goa at their ordination, that they contain a commission and a power derived from the Holy Ghost, given by the Eternal Son of the Father—to remit sin by applying those means which Christ has instituted and appointed for its remission; namely—

- (1). The sincere Word of God duly preached. The declaration of remission of sins in Christ’s Name to all those who repent and believe.
- (2). The Holy Sacrament of Baptism duly administered.

* Ambrose, *de Spiritu Sancto*, iii. 18.

† S. Chrysostom, *de Sacerdotio*, lib. iii., p. 88; ed. Hughes, Cant. 1710.

(3). The Holy Sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist rightly consecrated, and fully and freely dispensed.

(4). The prayers of the Priesthood for the forgiveness of sins.

The Christian Priest, who faithfully discharges his duty in performing these functions of his ministry, may cherish a humble and joyful hope that the priestly commission has been given him for gracious purposes and glorious ends, and that the work of his ministry will be approved and rewarded at the great day by the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.

It has indeed been said by certain writers[‡] that some of these powers were given by Christ to His Apostles before His Resurrection, and had been exercised by them. For example, they had already been sent forth to preach (Matt. x. 7; Luke ix. 2) and baptize (John iv. 2). And therefore it is alleged, that the gift of these powers could not be implied in those words spoken by our Lord *after* His Resurrection.

But, with deference to those who say this, it may be replied that, if a *general* commission to that effect had been given by Christ before His Resurrection, and a *general* ability to execute it, He would not have said, as we know from St. Matthew (xxviii. 19, 20), and St. Mark (xvi. 15), that he did *after His Resurrection*, “Go and *teach all Nations*, baptizing them—Go ye into *all the World*, and preach the Gospel to every creature.” Such words would have been superfluous. But the fact is, *before* the Resurrection no such command had been uttered; no such unlimited power had been bestowed upon the Apostles; the exercise of their ministry had been confined “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matth. x. 6), and within the narrow range of Palestine.

But after that He, Who alone has the Key of Death, and Who “openeth and no man shutteth” (Rev. i. 18, iii. 17), had opened the gate of Death by His Resurrection, He took into His hand the Key of Pardon, and unlocked also the doors of the prison-house of Sin, and put that Key into the hands of His

[‡] Cornelius a Lapide, on John xx. 22, and compare Bishop Andrewes on John xx. 23 Vol V. p. 95.

Apostles and their successors, and breathed upon them the quickening breath of the life-giving Spirit (Rom. iv. 24 ; John vi. 63), and enabled them to raise all, in every age and nation, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, and gave them a charter of emancipation as free as air and as wide as the universe, and said, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.”

(5). We are now arrived at the consideration of the other means by which the Priests of God’s Church remit sin, namely, by *pronouncing Absolution*.

This is done either *publicly* or *privately*.

It is done publicly by them in our daily office of Morning and Evening Prayer, and in the celebration of the Holy Communion.

It is clear that the Church regards the words then uttered as having power to convey an assurance of remission of sins to every one there present who is qualified by faith and repentance to receive it.

Let us refer to the Book of Common Prayer. There we read (after the introductory Sentences and the Exhortation, calling to repentance and acknowledgment of sin), “A General Confession to be said of the congregation after the Minister, *all kneeling* ;” and after the Confession, “the *Absolution or Remission of sins* to be pronounced by the *Priest alone standing*, the people still kneeling.”

A similar order is followed at the Holy Communion. “After the Confession, to be said by *all kneeling*,” “then shall the Priest, or the Bishop, being present, stand up, and turning himself to the people, pronounce this *Absolution*.” The Church of England does not say with the Church of Rome, that *Absolution* is a Sacrament of the Gospel,* and confers grace, as the two Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper do. But it is evident that the Church of England intends that the words publicly pronounced by the Priest in *Absolution* should be regarded as having power to convey a comfortable assurance to those who are conscious to themselves of sin,

* See Article xxv. and the Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments, p. 330, ed. Oxf., 1822, “*Absolution is no such Sacrament as Baptism and the Communion are.*” Cp. Hooker VI. iv. 3. who observes that it was never regarded as a Sacrament instituted by Christ for the conveyance of Grace till the 13th century. See also, *Ibid.* VI. vi. 4,

and also of sincere faith and repentance. She expressly calls each of these forms an *Absolution*; and her intention is to certify every penitent and faithful person there present, and confessing his sins to God, Who searcheth the heart, that God, Who alone can forgive sins, uses and blesses the ministry of His chosen and appointed servant the Priest, and gives remission of sins by means of the ministry which Christ has instituted; and that so our Lord's promise is fulfilled, "Whatsoever ye shall loose" (literally *shall have loosed*) on earth, shall be loosed in heaven; (Matth. xviii. 18), and "whosoever sins ye remit (literally *shall have remitted*), they are (literally *have been*) remitted unto them.

It is much to be deplored that these two forms of Absolution (viz., in the daily office of our Church, and in the Holy Communion) are now disparaged and despised by some among us, as if these forms were almost powerless and valueless, and had little relevance to the question of Confession and Absolution.

The great divines of the more learned days of the Church of England did not deem so lightly of them.

Let any one read what Richard Hooker* has written concerning the Absolution in the Morning and Evening Prayer. I will quote his words:—"It standeth with us in the Church of England, as touching public Confession, thus:—First, seeing day by day we in our Church begin our public prayers to Almighty God with public acknowledgment of our sins, in which confession every man, prostrate as it were before His glorious Majesty, crieth guilty against himself; and the Minister, with one sentence, pronounceth universally all clear whose acknowledgment so made hath proceeded from a true penitent mind; what reason is there every man should not, under the general terms of Confession, represent to himself his own particulars whatsoever; and adjoining thereunto that affection which a contrite spirit worketh, embrace to as full effect the words of divine grace, as if the same were severally and particularly uttered with addition of prayers, imposition of hands, or all the ceremonies and solemnities

* Hooker, *Eccl. Pol.* VI. iv. 15.

that might be used for the strengthening of men's affiance in God's peculiar mercy towards them? Such complements are helps to support our weakness, and not causes that serve to procure or produce His gifts. If with us there be "truth in the inward parts;" as David speaketh, the difference of general and particular forms in Confession and Absolution is not so material, that any man's safety or ghostly good should depend upon it."

So far Richard Hooker. And is it not also true that our best divines were ever of opinion that thanks are due from us to Almighty God that He had put it into the mind of the Church of England to place these forms of Absolution in her Office; and that, on account of the wisdom given her in this respect, she is justly an object of admiration and envy to other Churches? Is not this the language of Bishop Cosin,* of Joseph Bingham,† of Dean Comber,‡ and others? These our wise and pious forefathers would have felt sorrow and shame that we should unthankfully despise what they most lovingly esteemed as a precious gift of God to the Church of England, and to all faithful and penitent members of it.

We find that these forms of Absolution are now undervalued by some, for two reasons,

(1) because they are declaratory and precatory, that is, because in them the Priest *declares and pronounces* forgiveness in God's Name, and for Christ's Sake, as in the daily Office; or else that (as in the Communion Service) he *prays* for the bestowal of pardon

from God on those who have confessed their sins; but does not say "*I absolve thee from thy sins*," and because in their opinion (as in that of the Trent Council,)† the principal force of the form of what the Church of Rome calls the Sacrament of Penance consists in the use of those words, "*Ego absolvo te*," and that consequently the use of *that* form is necessary; and further

(2) because the above words of Absolution are spoken *in public*

* Bishop Cosin, *Notes on the Order for Morning Prayer*, Third Series, Vol. v. p. 443, cp. Ibid, p. 47. † Bingham, Vol. viii. p. 416, 417. † Dean Comber, *Companion to the Temple*, Part I, Sect. iv. Dr. Bisse, *on the Beauty of Holiness in the Common Prayer*, Serm. ii. p. 37.

† Concil. Tridentin. Sess. xiv. Cap. 3, and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, Pars. iii. qu. 84, cp. Hooker, VI. iv. 3.

to many persons confessing their sins to God, and not *in private* to one singly confessing his sins to the Priest.

With regard to the first of these reasons we may reply, that, if it had any weight, there was no such thing as any Absolution of sins pronounced for eleven hundred years after Christ, inasmuch as it is unquestionable that all the forms of Absolution used in the Church during that time were declaratory* or precatory, and the form, "I absolve thee" (although an allowable form† when rightly applied), was not used till the eleventh century after Christ and has not been used in the Greek Church to this day.

This is acknowledged by the most learned divines of the Church of Rome herself,‡ and has been shown at large by our own writers.§

No one, who is acquainted with the practice of the Catholic Church of God for a thousand years, would venture to censure or disparage the forms of Absolution contained in our daily office, and at the Holy Communion, because they are declaratory and precatory. In doing so he would be setting himself against the Church universal, which used no other forms before the eleventh century. Robert Nelson informs us that Bishop Bull, in his last illness, *preferred* the use of the form in the Communion Office as most primitive and catholic. (*Life*, p. 393).

The second allegation is, that the virtue of Absolution consists in the private exercise of the priestly office on the souls of individuals

* Peter Lombard, one of the greatest Roman Catholic divines and schoolmen of the twelfth century, the scholar of St. Bernard, and professor of theology at Paris, afterwards Bishop there (A.D. 1160), and commonly called the "Master of the Sentences," affirmed that all forms of Absolution were in fact *declaratory*. See the remarkable words in his *Libri Sententiarum*, Lib. iv., Distinct 18, p. 375, ed. Paris, 1841. He thus speaks:—"It is evident from what has been said, that God Himself releases the penitent from liability to punishment; and He releases him then when He enlightens his soul and gives him true contrition of heart. Therefore, he is not loosed from everlasting wrath by the priest to whom he confesses his sin, but he is already loosed by God, to whom he has made his confession." And Peter Lombard then quotes S. Ambrose, S. Augustine, and S. Jerome to the same effect; and compares the work of Absolution to the raising of Lazarus from the grave. Lazarus was raised by Christ, Who afterwards commanded His disciples to loose Him from his grave clothes, and let him go. (John xi. 44.) So it is with the penitent. And (following S. Jerome in his note on Matth. xvi.) he illustrates it by the act of the Levitical priests, who declared the leper to be clean, and to be restored to communion with the people of God; but the act of healing was the act of God, and of God alone; and "God regards not so much the sentence of the priest as the heart and life of the penitent."

† See Bingham, xix. ii. 6.

‡ e.g. Morinus, *de Paenitentiâ*, lib. viii. c. 8 The work of Thomas Aquinas in defence of that form may be seen in his works, vol. xix., p. 176, ed. Venet, 1787.

§ e.g. Abp. Ussher, *Answer to a Jesuit*, p. 89; see also Abp. Fell in his edition of *St. Cyprian, De lapsed*, p. 136; and Marshall in his learned work on the *Penitential Discipline of the Ancient Church*, chap. iii., sect. iv.; Bingham, *Antiquities* xix. ii., and vol. 8, p. 450—454.

in the Confessional ; and that our Lord's words had special reference to that exercise.

This, then, brings us to examine the question of private Confession.

What is to be said concerning it ?

First let it not be supposed* that we would in the least degree disparage that sober and comforting use of "the ministry of reconciliation,"† which Holy Scripture and the Primitive Church sanction, and which the Church of England commends to her children, in special cases, in the Exhortation to the Holy Communion, and in the Office for the Visitation of the Sick.‡ We do not forget that our best divines have recommended it, in certain circumstances, and under certain conditions,§ and that the most celebrated foreign Reformers, Calvin, Beza, and the authors of the Lutheran 'Confession,'|| have done the same. On the contrary, we feel persuaded that in this, as in other matters, the *abuse* of what in special cases and under certain restrictions is good and wholesome, holy and wise, has created a prejudice against the *use* of it.

The Church of England, in her Exhortation to the Holy Communion, recommends private confession of sin to those of her children who "cannot otherwise quiet their own consciences, but require further comfort and counsel." And in her office for the Visitation of the sick she says that if the sick person feels his conscience troubled with any weighty matter, he is to be moved by the Priest to make a special Confession of his sins.

The reasons why she does this in the former of these two special cases are clearly stated by herself in that Exhortation ; and the causes why she does it in the latter are declared by Hooker,* as follows— "They who during life and health are never destitute of ways to elude repentance, do, notwithstanding, oftentimes when their last hour draweth on, both feel that sting which before lay dead in them, and also thirst after such helps as have been always till then

* Some sentences which follow have been printed by the Author in the Twelve Addresses delivered at his Visitation in 1873.

† 2 Cor. v. 18. ‡ Compare Hooker VI., iv. 6 and 15. § e.g., Bp. Jewel, *Apol.* p. 158, ed. 1611 ; Hooker, vi. iv. 15, and vi. vi. 5. || Calvin, *Institut.* iv. c. 1 ; Beza, homil. 16, in *Hist. Resurrect.*, p. 394, 395 ; *Confessio Augustin.* Art. xi. xii. *Chemnit.* p. 373, 394.

* Hooker VI. iv. 5.

unsavoury. . . . Yea, because to countervail the fault of delay, there are in the latest repentance oftentimes the surest tokens of sincere dealing, therefore, upon special confession made to the minister of God, he presently absolveth, *in this case*, the sick party from all his sins by that authority which Jesus Christ hath committed to him."

But surely, to infer from these two exceptional cases, that the Church of England authorises her Ministers to recommend private Confession as a regular practice is strangely to pervert her words, and to affirm that she intends her Clergy to feed her children with medicines which she has provided for the sick.

Again, she exhorts those who are troubled in mind, and who cannot quiet their own consciences, to resort "to some *discreet and learned* minister of God's Word, and open his grief ; that by the ministry of God's Holy Word he may have the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness." But some among us would invert this order ; they would constrain the people of a parish to come habitually and confess to their minister, who may be some youthful priest, perhaps neither learned nor discreet, and who may be more able to create scruples and doubtfulness in the minds of others, than to quiet them by the ministry of God's Holy Word.

And some would persuade us that the solemn words of our Blessed Lord, pronounced at the Ordination of Priests at the laying on of hands, have been spoken to little purpose unless the newly made Priest applies himself at once to exercise his ministry by hearing private Confessions and by pronouncing private Absolutions.

The Church of Rome wisely requires that a person who undertakes the difficult and responsible office of hearing Confessions should be eminent in theological science, learning, and wisdom.*

* See the Trent Catechism, pt. ii., cap. v. qu. 49, where this rule is laid down, " Ut hujus sacramenti minister tum scientia et eruditio tum prudentia praeeditus sit. Judicis enim ctimedici simul personam gerit. Ex quo poterant fideles intelligere, cuivis maximo studio curandum esse, ut eum sibi sacerdotem eligit, quem vitae integritas, doctrina, prudens iudicium, commendet, qui, quae cuique sceleri pena conveniat, et qui vel solvendi vel ligandi sint, optime noverit." Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, in his "Monita ad Confessores" of his diocese, thus writes :—" Let no secular or regular priest presume to minister the sacrament of penance (in this diocese) unless he has first obtained from us a written licence and

This is a grave and serious matter. In the medical treatment of our perishable bodies, quackery is punishable by law. Surely spiritual empiricism, which may jeopardize the health of immortal souls, ought not to escape scot-free. The physician of the body is not allowed to write a prescription without having obtained a diploma: and shall any one venture to undertake the office of a Penitentiary in the Church of God without being duly qualified and authorised to do so? Heaven forbid! I confess that when I think of devout persons, especially young women, of ardent affections and delicate sensibilities, being invited, and almost constrained, perhaps by some youthful priest, to resort habitually to private Confession, I shudder at the thought. By so doing, instead of looking up to God as their loving Father, having His ear open to their prayers, and ever ready to receive them, on their faith and repentance, as His dear children in Christ, they are led to look to a man, and to seek comfort and forgiveness of him. They put themselves under his dominion, and thus submit their will, reason, and conscience to him, and rob Christ of themselves, whom He has purchased with His own Blood.* And further, by being tempted to brood over their own spiritual sensations, emotions, and symptoms, and to talk or write of them to their chosen spiritual guides, they are in danger of acquiring an egotistical spirit of self-consciousness, and of morbid and hypochondriacal sentimentalism, and to lose that healthful vigour and genuine freshness and holy beauty of soul which are produced and cherished by direct communion with God, and by looking upward to Him, and by losing self in adoration of Him, and in zeal for His glory, and in love for His presence in the heart—which is the life of angels. I shrink from the thought of the anatomical dissection of consciences to which such votaries are required to submit, and from that long catalogue of interrogatories, which may be seen in any “Manual of Confession”—

faculty to do so, as the Council of Trent prescribes; otherwise he will have incurred excommunication *ipso facto*.” It would be well if priests of the Church of England, who are eager to constrain others to come to them for confession, would carefully read these “*Monita ad Confessores*” of one of the wisest and holiest Bishops of the Church of Rome. In the Greek Church (says Dr. Covel on the “Greek Church,” p. 252) “a confessor ought to be a most casuist, and be at least forty years old.”

* 1 Cor. vi. 20, vii. 23; Gal. v. 1.

as taught and practised by the Church of Rome—and which are an outrage against purity, modesty, and virtue.

It is earnestly to be hoped, for reasons such as these, that the desires and intentions of some persons to introduce the practice of private Confession into English schools, public and private, may never be realized. The condition of schools in France, where such a practice prevails, is deplored by all who know them. And it is certain that the habit of going to Confession would give occasion to levity among the scholars, by ministering topics for loose talking and jesting among them, and thus be a cause of irreverence and profaneness.

But while I say this, let me earnestly exhort and entreat my reverend Bretheren to cultivate habits of *personal* intercourse with their parishioners, especially the young, in preparing them for *Confirmation*; and as members of *communicant classes*. And let me request you to urge upon them the importance and necessity of regular *self-examination*—daily, if possible; and for this purpose, I would ask you to recommend to each of them some good Manual of self-examination; such as may be found in Bishop Ken's *Exposition of the Church Catechism*.

Private Confession is exacted by the Church of Rome, which has converted penance into a Sacrament: and she by requiring private Confession as a pre-requisite to the Holy Communion, places one Sacrament, made by herself, as a bar to the reception of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, instituted by Christ.* And whereas the Holy Spirit says, by St. Paul, “Let a man *examine himself*, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup,”† she says, “Let a man confess to a Priest and submit himself to be examined by a Priest and so let him come to Communion;” and also, whereas St. John‡ says, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,” she ventures to say that it is necessary to resort to the human minister in order to obtain pardon from God, Whose servant he is. And Confession in the Church of Rome is not so

* *Concil. Lateran.* IV., A.D. 1215, can. 21; *Conc. Trident.* Sep. XIII., cap. 7, can. 11; *Catechism. Rom.*, Part II., cap. iv., qu. 43. Cp. *Hooker VI.*, iv. 3.

† 1 Cor. xi. 28.

‡ 1 John i. 9.

much a voluntary unburdening of sorrow on the part of the penitent, as an inquisitorial scrutiny of the penitent on the part of the priest.

Holy Scripture speaks much concerning the duty of repentance, but in no case does it require Confession, as a matter of necessity, to anyone but God.

The examples of acknowledgments of sin which are mentioned in the New Testament as being made to men, are either public avowals of public sin, as that of those who came to St. John's Baptism,* and of the men at Ephesus,† and of St. Paul at Jerusalem for his share in the death of St. Stephen ;‡ or else they were Confessions of wrong done to a brother, and with a petition for pardon from him, as those specified by St. James.§ To cite again the words of Richard Hooker :|| “There are men that would seem to honour Antiquity, and none more to depend on the reverend judgment thereof. I dare boldly affirm that for many hundred years after Christ, the Fathers held no such opinion concerning our Saviour's words, “Whose sins ye remit they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain they are retained (John xx. 23);” they did not gather by our Saviour's words any such necessity of seeking the Priest's Absolution from sin by secret and (as they now term it) Sacramental Confession ; public Confession they thought necessary by way of discipline, not private Confession as in the nature of a Sacrament necessary.” Again, he says, (VI., iv. 14) : In the times of the Holy Fathers “it was *not* the faith and doctrine of God's Church as it is of the Papacy at the present time, (1) that the only remedy for sin after Baptism is Sacramental penitency ; (2) that Confession in secret is an essential part thereof ; (3) that God Himself cannot now forgive sin without the Priest ; (4) that because forgiveness at the hands of the Priest must arise from Confession in the offenders, therefore Confession unto him is a matter of such necessity as being not either in deed or at the least in desire performed excludeth utterly from all pardon. No, no ; these opinions have youth in their countenance. Antiquity knew them not ; it never thought or dreamed of them.”

* Matt. iii. 6. † Acts xix. 18 ‡ Acts xxii. 20. § James v. 14, 16. || Hooker, VI., iv. 6.

Public Confession is recommended to penitents by Tertullian* and by Cyprian† and St. Ambrose,‡ with a view of obtaining the benefit of the prayers of the Church. In the third century, as it seems,§ in order to obviate the scandals that arose “from the multitude of public penitents,” the Greek Church appointed some one presbyter to be a penitentiary in each church to receive voluntary Confessions in private, with a view to public penance, if requisite, and consequent Absolution by the Bishop. But this office was abolished by Nectarius, Patriarch of Constantinople, at the end of the fourth century,|| and the successor of Nectarius, St. Chrysostom, in several places gives as his counsel to penitents to confess their sins to God; but expressly disclaims any intention or desire of making them confess to man;** and so in like terms St. Augustine.†† At that time, Confession of secret sins to God alone was the practice of the Church.†††

Public offenders were put to public penance, but the Confession of secret sins was left to the discretion and conscience of those who committed them.††††

Indeed, if private Confession and private Absolution were, as some allege, necessary to the spiritual health of the soul, it must be acknowledged that the Church of God was in a state of spiritual sickness from the time of the Holy Apostles for 1,200 years; for it was not till the year after Christ 1215, that private Confession was made obligatory even by the Church of Rome,††††† and then only once a year.

* Tertullian, *De Pœnitentia*, c. 9 and c. 10; Bingham, Book XVII., chap. iii.

† S. Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, c. 14.

‡ S. Ambrose, *De Pœnitentia*, ii. 7; *Quid vereris apud bonum Dominum tuas iniurias fateri?* and ii. 10, *Fleat pro te Mater Ecclesia; amat Christus ut pro uno multi rogent.*

§ See Mr. Keble on Hooker, VI., iv. 9.

|| Socrates, H. E., v. 19; Sozomen, vii. 16. Cp. Hooker, VI., iv.

** S. Chrysostom, *Homil. xxxi. Epist. ad Hebreos*, Tom. xii., p. 289, ed. Montfaucon, and *De Incomprehensibili Dei natura*, *Homil. v.*, sec. 7, Tom. i., p. 490, where he says, “I do not lead thee into a theatre of thy fellow-servants, or compel thee to reveal thy sins to men; unfold thy conscience before God, and show thy wounds to Him, and beseech Him to heal them.” Cp. Bingham, Book XV., chap. viii., sec. 6, and Book XVIII., chap. iii.

†† S. Augustine, *Confession*, x. 3; *Quid mihi cum hominibus, ut audiant Confessiones meas?*

††† See Bingham, chap. iii., and Marshall's *Penitential Discipline*, chap. 2, sec. i. p. 43, ed. Oxford, 1844.

†††† Marshall, p. 44; Bingham, Book XV., chap. viii., sec. 6.

††††† At the Fourth Lateran Council, *Canon 21* Concil. ed. Labbe, xi., p. 172. That private Confession was not enforced in the twelfth century is clear from the words of Gratian, in *Jus Canonicum Dist. de Pœnitentia*, c. 79.

Our own Church expresses a desire* for the restoration of ancient public discipline. Let us help her in her endeavours for this purpose ; and in order that we may do this more effectually, let us imitate her wisdom and moderation in following the rule of Scripture and the Primitive Church with regard to private Confession.

And now, my dear friends, let me say a few words in conclusion.

In the controversies on this subject, which now agitate the minds of many among us, let us endeavour, with God's help, to cherish a spirit of calmness and of love. In the strifes of earth let us lift up our hearts to the peace of heaven. Let us praise God for the blessings He has bestowed on us in the Church of England, where we enjoy, by His mercy, all things necessary for our growth in grace on earth, and for the attainment of everlasting glory in heaven. Let us bless Him for the wisdom He has given to the Church of England to pursue a middle course between two opposite extremes.

On the one side, let us shun the error of those who do wrong to Him, and injure their own souls, and those of others, by scorning those spiritual comforts which He offers by the ministry of the Christian Priesthood, deriving its authority from Christ, Who breathed on the Apostles and said, "Receive the Holy Ghost ; Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them."

On the other side, let us avoid the dangerous delusion of those who do dishonour to God and to Christ, and restrain and curtail His free grace and mercy to the wounded and bleeding soul, by teaching that there is no remedy for mortal sin after baptism, but by "the Sacrament of Penance ;" and that no contrition of the heart, and no confession of the lips, are of any avail, without the intervention of a spiritual guide ; and that no reparation of wrong, no amendment of life, no works of piety and mercy, no fasting, no almsgiving, are of use to the penitent, except imposed by a confessor ; and who bind all men upon pain of everlasting condemnation to make private Confession of every great offence that they know and remember that

* In the beginning of the Communion Service.

they have ever committed against God, and who affirm that He will never pardon our sins unless we first reveal them to a Priest, or earnestly desire to do so.*

Of these two errors, that which I have just described has, by an excess of reaction common in human affairs, produced the former. If, therefore, we are desirous for the sake of Christ and of His Church, that the Christian Priesthood should receive due honour from the People, let us beware of claiming more for it than has been granted to it by Christ, lest by lording it over God's heritage (1 Pet. v. 3) we forfeit the reverence of those whose love is a precious talent entrusted to us by Him.

The *gift* of pardon for sin is from God alone. But the *assurance* of the bestowal of the gift is conveyed to us by the ministry of the Priesthood ; the act of which, in pronouncing Absolution, is a proof to us of the reality of the gift, because the ministry of the Priesthood was instituted and appointed by Christ, and is commissioned by him to certify us of the fact of the gift. The act of the Priest or Bishop, *standing up* in the congregation, while we are kneeling on our knees, and in *that* attitude of authority pronouncing Absolution and invoking God's pardon upon us, in the Name of God " Who hath given power and commandment to his Ministers to declare and pronounce to his people being penitent, the Absolution and remission of their sins," is like a royal seal and authentic sign-manual attached to a reprieve, brought by a royal officer and delegate to a penitent criminal, and assuring him of pardon from his Sovereign.

The Dove, which the Patriarch Noah saw returning to him in the evening into the Ark, with the olive leaf plucked off in her mouth, was *not* a *cause* of the assuaging of the waters of the Flood (Gen. viii. 2), but it was a sign and assurance to him that they were assuaged, and filled his heart with thankfulness and joy. The wagons which Joseph had sent, and which the Patriarch Jacob saw coming to him from Egypt into Canaan, to carry him to his beloved

* See *Concil. Tridentin.* Sess. xiv, capp. 1-9, *de Sacramento Pienitentiae*; Bellarmine, lib. iv. *De Pienitentia*, Tom. iii., ed. 1615, pp. 376-482, especially lib. iii., p. 435, where he says "that no one who has sinned after baptism, can be restored without the ministry of the Priest." Perrone, *de Pienitentia*, pp. 344-354, ed. Paris, 1842. Cp. Hooker, VI. vi. Bingham, vol. viii. p. 432.

son, whom he had thought to be dead (Gen. xlv. 27), were *not* a cause of Joseph's restoration to life and to his father, but they were a sure sign and confirmation to him of that which he had hardly hoped, but which he now fully believed, and therefore "his spirit revived, and he said It is enough. Joseph, my son, is yet alive ; I will go and see him before I die." (Gen. xlv. 28).

Let us also recognize in our appointed office of ministering the Holy Word and Sacraments, which God has instituted as means and instruments for the forgiveness of iniquities, and in our daily function of declaring and pronouncing Absolution and remission of the sins of others, a constraining motive to keep ourselves unspotted from the world, and to endeavour to perfect holiness in the fear of God. (James i. 27 ; 2 Cor. vii. 1.) "Physician, heal thyself." (Luke iv. 23.) It is an unseemly thing in the eyes of God and men to profess to cleanse others, while we ourselves are unclean ; and to pretend to wash away the stains of others, while our own hearts and hands are defiled by sin. Therefore "be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord." (Isaiah lii. 11).

Next, since the Priests of God's Church are spiritual physicians, and ought to be able to prescribe and apply those spiritual medicines which are needed by the sick soul, conscious to itself of sin, and in doubt, sorrow, and distress, and even in agony and anguish of spirit, therefore they ought to be diligent and unwearied in the study of God's Holy Word, and of such other sacred learning, as may best qualify them by the grace given to earnest prayer for the due discharge of their office in this difficult matter.* "The Priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth." (Malachi ii. 7).

To our lay brethren let me also say,—You owe a debt of reverence, gratitude, and love to the Christian Priesthood. It might have pleased God to save you without its help. He might have saved you without its ministry, or without any means of grace at all. But in order to bind you more closely to us, and to join us to you in the bonds of the nearest and dearest affection, He has made our office in ministering the means of pardon and grace,—the

* See Bishop Bull's Sermon. Sermon vi., "The Priest's office difficult and dangerous."

Word of God and Sacraments, and Prayer,—to be necessary to your Salvation, where ever they may be had. And let no one imagine our ministry to be a feeble thing, although, in declaring and pronouncing Absolution and Remission of sins in the daily office of Morning and Evening Prayer, or in invoking God's pardon and blessing upon you in the Holy Communion, or in lifting our hands over you in the stillness of the private chamber, in the hours of sickness and of death, and in saying those solemn words,—“ By Christ's authority, committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,”—we do not claim for ourselves the power to give pardon, but only as heralds sent from God Himself, to certify and assure you, that He is ever ready to be gracious to you for His dear Son's sake, and that if you have true repentance, lively faith, and fervent love to God and man, and are resolved to forsake your sins, and to make reparation for them, and heartily pray for pardon from Him, and for the Grace of the Holy Ghost to enable you to keep your good resolutions of amendment, He has washed away your sins in the Blood of Christ, and will remember them no more. And let no one persuade you, that by whatever name these forms of Absolution may be called, whether they be declaratory, or precatory, or indicative, it matters little by *whom* they are pronounced, and that they may as well be uttered by an unordained person, as by a Priest of the Church of God. But be sure that God will bless your faithful, obedient, and loving use of that Apostolic Ministry, which Christ has instituted for conveying God's pardon to you, and in which the Divine Breath of Christ still lives and moves, which he breathed on the Apostles themselves on the evening of His Resurrection, when He said, “ Receive ye the Holy Ghost, Whosesoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.”

I am, my dear friends,

Your affectionate brother in Christ,

C. LINCOLN.

Riseholme, Lincoln,

Epiphany, 1874.





